

Sermon July 6, 2025 – Pastor Lara Forbes

Grace to you and peace from God, our Creator, and from our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Jeremiah 29:11 – For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

This is one of the most well-known verses in the Bible. It's on countless coffee mugs and greeting cards, pillows and wall hangings. It's the chosen verse for many baptisms and confirmations.

Its popularity is because it offers assurance and hope. And it can be particularly comforting in difficult life situations. Which is exactly what it's supposed to do.

It was written to the Judeans in exile who had very little hope for their future, and who believed that God had abandoned them. They were facing the consequences of their actions – turning away from Yahweh and not listening to Jeremiah's pleas to turn back.

By the time these words were written, Jerusalem had been taken over by Babylon and the ruling class of Judah had been sent into exile. In addition to being forced to migrate, they'd become cheap labor for their overlords.

Things were bad. And so they asked Jeremiah what to do. How to live in a strange land.

And Jeremiah didn't tell the people what they wanted to hear. He told them the truth. He proclaimed the unpopular message that the exile would last a long time. It may or may not have been seventy years – but it would last at least a couple of generations.

He told them, simply, to live. To establish a life right where they were. To build houses and live in them. To plant gardens and eat what they produce. To even get married and have children.

Jeremiah told them, too, to seek the welfare of the city where they lived – the city of their enemies. To pray to Yahweh on its behalf because in its welfare they would find their own.

In English, the word “welfare” is defined as “the health, happiness, and fortunes of a person or group.”

But in Hebrew, the language of Jeremiah, “welfare” means “shalom” – a word that means “peace.” But in the Hebrew language, words go beyond their spoken pronunciation. They convey feeling, intent, and emotion.

And the word “shalom” conveys a feeling of wholeness, well-being, safety, and security.

Jeremiah told the exiled Judeans to seek the shalom of Babylon – to seek the shalom of their enemies, so that they would find their own shalom.

The idea of doing that was unheard of at the time. Praying for one’s enemy and seeking peace for and with them just wasn’t done. And it still isn’t a popular idea. But it gave the Judeans direction for their lives in a hostile civic environment. They were to maintain and practice their identity, their faith in Yahweh, in the land of their enemy.

As they did, they would come to trust that even though they were living in exile, they had not been exiled from God.

We know that Jesus continued to teach the principle of praying for one’s enemy and seeking peace with and for them. It was a core part of his ministry and a foundational part of the disciples’ learning.

For them, doing that was easy at first because Jesus was with them to show them how and to encourage them along the way. But in today’s gospel reading, it’s Jesus’ last night with them. He’s told them that he’s leaving and they’re trying to make sense of that.

And Jesus spends four chapters assuring them that they’re not being abandoned. Reminding them of the community they’ve become and will need to continue to be in the coming days, weeks, months, and years.

And Jesus promises them that the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, will come alongside them in their need. Especially in their anxiety, fear, and even grief. It will affirm the disciples’ decision to continue to follow Jesus even when they don’t get it right.

God’s Holy Spirit as their guide will make it possible for them to bear witness and share the good news of Jesus. And they will learn to trust that even though Jesus is no longer with them, he hasn’t abandoned them.

In both of these readings, the Judeans and the disciples are in a confusing time. Both groups are trying to figure out what to do next in a time of unfamiliarity – when they don't, or soon won't, have any clear leadership to guide them. Both groups are feeling abandoned by God.

And in both readings, they're told to live their faith in God right where they are. Things are different and will continue to be so, but they haven't been abandoned. And it's possible, and even necessary, to hold onto their identity as people of faith in new or unfamiliar settings.

Because it's what will keep them connected to one another and to God through whatever they might face.

The bill that passed in Congress last week, and signed into law on Friday, will likely have a negative impact on the lives of millions of people. And the executive orders that followed will likely have a negative impact on the environment. When things of that magnitude happen, it's sometimes hard to know how to respond.

We may feel like we've been abandoned and left to fend for ourselves.

¹When we feel like that, oftentimes the temptation is to turn inward – away from others, even away from Jesus. But when we do that, we become disconnected from what's going on around us. We become disconnected from the people who are affected by what's happening. And when we become disconnected from the people, we forget their humanity.

And when we forget their humanity for long enough, we no longer consider them to be human at all. And then we judge our neighbor instead of loving them. We blame people for suffering under systems that are designed to exploit and exclude them. We take comfort in others' pain instead of lifting them up.

When we turn inward, our hearts become hardened and closed off to truth, to compassion.

What Jeremiah and Jesus remind us, is that as people of faith we are called to turn outward and to seek the shalom of others – those whom we consider to be our neighbor and those whom we consider to be our enemy. We are called to seek their wholeness, well-being, safety, and security.

¹ July 3, 2025: <https://www.facebook.com/ErockHaitz>

²And what Jesus, in particular, reminds us is that we are called to meet times like this with resurrection. With life.

We are called to keep investing in the ministries we're already investing in with whatever resources we can muster. And to seek new opportunities for ways to serve in the name of Christ for the sake of others. Jesus calls us to lift up the people who are just trying to survive day-to-day.

We are called to speak out against policies that bring harm and death. And to create policies and systems and practices that bring and restore life. To live in such a way that a just and lasting peace is established and enjoyed by all people throughout the world. Remembering that that peace isn't only the absence of violence, it's also the presence of justice.

Is it easy to live this way? Not always. It's a commitment that's a long and sometimes scary road to travel. But we don't do it alone, and we don't have to wait for God's Spirit to come alongside us because it's already here. Giving us the endurance and courage to seek shalom – the wholeness, well-being, safety, and security of others.

As we live this response of resurrection, this response of life, may we be assured that we will find shalom for ourselves. And in that shalom, we will also find the hope that God has promised for our world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

² <https://breachrepairers.org/get-involved/news/bishop-barber-responds-to-congress-passing-a-deadly-budget-bill/>